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ABSTRACT

The political and religious characteristics of parents in four western states who educate their children at home are examined. The relation of those characteristics to parents' decisions to circumvent state-sponsored education services are also considered. Additional discussion focuses on the relevance of the findings for public policy. The target population included all families conducting home education in Washington, Oregon, Utah, and Nevada. Data were collected with a questionnaire of 54 items on 290 variables. Findings and discussion in this report are based on data from only one of the states. Of nearly 4,500 mailings to families in the state, the responses of 582 families were usable. Consistent with previous research, home school parents in this study were religiously committed and highly orthodox. Many belong to peripheral Christian religious organizations. Politically, the respondents were overwhelmingly Republican and conservative; only seven percent identified themselves as Democratic and only five percent considered themselves liberal. It is concluded that educational policymakers need to understand the importance that home school parents attach to family value systems and ways of life. Policymakers should acknowledge such parents' resistance to rationally organized institutions that marginalize their participation. Twenty-seven references are included. (RH)

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POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS CHARACTERISTICS OF HOME SCHOOL PARENTS: RESULTS OF AN ONGOING STUDY IN FOUR WESTERN STATES

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POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS CHARACTERISTICS OF HOME SCHOOL PARENTS: RESULTS OF AN ONGOING STUDY IN FOUR WESTERN STATES

The history of public schooling has been marked by continuous struggles and conflicts over the best way to provide for the education of children (Shor, 1986). In a fundamental sense, these struggles are related to the changing relationship between families and public schools. Previous to the nineteenth century, when families taught their children at home, there was little, if any, distinction between the private and public spheres of life (Sennett, 1977; Cancian, 1987). Family values were directly transmitted to children and the task of 'education' was perceived as an inalienable parental right (Bailyn, 1960; Cremin, 1961). During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, as production tasks were removed from the home to the newly emerging industrial cities, public forms of schooling became essential to secure the conditions within which the new social order could evolve (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Spring, 1976). Compulsory education laws were enacted, the number of state-controlled school systems grew, and a more bureaucratic and centralized system of education emerged. Spring (1986) points out that the real significance of these developments lies in how the new forms of school organization altered the relationship between families and education. From family-based education, to the development of specialized schools, to large state systems, by the twentieth century the traditional relationship between families and

schooling had been significantly altered; the role of parents in respect to education was substantially diminished.

During the last decade, the U.S. has witnessed a growing number of parents attempting to reverse the history of their diminished control over the education of their children (Carper, 1983; Lines, 1987). One of the most specific forms these attempts have taken is reflected in the growth of the home school movement (Feinstein, 1986; Lines, 1989, 1991). Research on home schools and the parents who operate them, although limited, has traced the demographic, religious, and political characteristics of home school parents as well as uncovered the primary motives that underpin the decision these parents make to teach their children at home (Mayberry, 1988 & 1989; Van Galen, 1986; Mayberry & Knowles, 1989). Moreover, researchers are now beginning to address the relationship between the growth of home schools, state policy-making processes, and wider social changes (Mayberry & Knowles, 1989; Mayberry, 1991a; Hadeed, 1991).

The purpose of this paper is to add to the growing body of literature on home school parents by discussing the results of a U.S. Department of Education funded study of home schooling in four Western states. Specifically, the paper will examine the political and religious characteristics of home school parents and discuss how these characteristics are related to their decision to circumvent state-sponsored education. Finally, the relevancy of these factors for pursuing intelligent and potentially successful policy options will be discussed.

METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a larger, ongoing, field-initiated federally funded project (Knowles, Mayberry, Ray, 1989) that is examining home education in four western states in order inform both the general public and public school educators about why an increasing number of families are choosing to teach their children at home, provide information about how the needs of home educated children could be met by public schools, and identify a range of home school policy suggestions acceptable to both educational policymakers and home school parents. The findings and discussion in this report are based on data from only one of the four states. We do not have any particular reason to hypothesize that the findings from this one state will differ significantly from what will be found when data from all four states are analyzed.

Population and Sample

The target population was all home education families in Washington, Oregon, Utah, and Nevada. Home education leaders in the state were consulted to determine the best strategy for contacting the most representative sample of all families in the state. It was decided to use the home school mailing lists of school districts in areas where superintendents would release this information in combination with the mailing lists of state-wide organizations that service home school parents.

Survey Instrument

Three researchers collaborated in formulating survey questionnaire items that would elicit responses relevant to the objectives of the larger ongoing study and the objectives specific

to the present report. A questionnaire comprised of 56 items (or 290 variables for analysis) was constructed.

Steps were taken to maximize the validity of the survey. A list of relevant concepts were developed and a variety of ways to measure them were sought. Studies dealing with similar concepts were reviewed, and questions measuring these concepts were identified. Approximately one-third of the items were drawn from a statewide survey conducted previously in one of the four states.

Other sources of questions came from polling agencies such as the National Opinion Research Company, the Gallup Foundation, and the United States Census Bureau. The questions chosen from these sources were then studied and a judgment made about their ability to elicit information germane to the concept.

In addition, both closed- and open-ended questions were used to measure similar concepts, and the responses to these multiple indicators could be compared to see if each had produced similar results.

The validity of the survey was further enhanced by a pilot study. The survey was pilot tested with a group of home education parents. They were allowed input into the construction of the survey and asked to point out questions they felt were not representative of their attitudes or beliefs about specific topics. The responses and suggestions emanating from the pilot study provided input for the final construction of the survey.

Data Collection and Analysis

As mentioned previously, the results reported in this study come from one state. In that state, a "neutral" person, trusted by

the three groups which provided mailing lists, went through the lists provided to eliminate redundancy. Surveys were then mailed to 4,500 home school families. Due to the timing of the acquisition of the lists and other unforeseen limitations, the list of a second statewide home school organization was merged with 100 additional addresses (not previously identified) and redundancy eliminated. This second merging resulted in a list of 1,245 addresses. Linear systematic sampling was used to select a representative sample of 472 of these addresses, and surveys were mailed to them. All mailings included a self-addressed stamped envelope for return. The response of 582 families were usable in this study. It is difficult to establish a response rate from these figures. Problems associated with whether the mailing lists were up-to-date and the degree to which all addresses represented home education families interferes with making an accurate inference about the response rate. We were encouraged to note, however, that our return included respondents from the general demographic and motivation categories of home school parents identified in previous research (Mayberry, 1988; Van Galen, 1986).

Quantitative data (from closed-ended questions) were entered and stored in one data base. The SPSSX statistical program was used for computation of descriptive statistics. Qualitative data (from open-ended questions) were entered onto a data base program. The "constant comparative" method (Glaser & Strauss (1967) was used to organize the responses to specific questions relevant to this paper.

FINDINGS

Religious Characteristics

Previous research has illustrated the importance of religion to many home school parents. Linden (1983) specifically asked her survey respondents' why public schools failed to meet their children's educational needs. Over sixty percent reported that their decision to home school was related to the humanistic values disseminated in public schools, the lack of religious freedom and the teaching of evolutionary theory. Home school parents in her sample were active in Christian communities and belonged to small Protestant denominations. Wartes' (1987) study provided consistent information. Twenty-two percent of his sample reported they chose home schooling to provide their children with an educational environment more supportive of their religious beliefs. The qualitative studies of Bates (1987) and Van Galen (1986) illuminated the religious world-view of many home school parents and specifically demonstrated that the decision to teach their children at home was related to their opposition to the secular curriculum and humanistic orientation of public schools. Mayberry (1988) provided more detailed-information about the religious orientation of many home school parents. In her study, sixty-five percent of the parents chose home school for religious reasons. These parents had predominantly been raised in traditional or mainstream religions (e.g., Protestant, Catholic) but had switched their affiliation to non-denomination or peripheral religious organizations (e.g., Four Square, Christian Reform, Evangelical, Pentecostal). These parents displayed a high degree of religious commitment and attended church

significantly more often than the general population. Moreover, the study demonstrated that religious values were the primary factor in the decision these parents made to start a home school.

The religious characteristics of home school parents in this study follow a similar pattern (see Table 1). For instance, 67% felt their religious or spiritual beliefs were 'very important' in making the decision to home school while only 11% considered them to be 'not too important' or 'not important at all.' Over 25% of these parents also felt that their parents' religion and their own religious upbringing was the factor that had the greatest impact on their own parenting styles. When asked about why they would not enroll their children in public schools, 13% cited 'lack of religious curriculum' as the number one factor. Another 28% listed this factor as their second, third, or fourth reason.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

Consistent with previous research, the home school parents in this study were religiously committed and displayed a high degree of religous orthodoxy (see Table 2). For instance, 74% of the respondents attended church 'every week' or 'several times' a week, 89% described their personal religious commitment as 'very important', and 84% strongly agreed with the five items included on the scale of religious orthodoxy. Moreover, parents in this study also tended to belong to non-denominational and peripheral religious organizations (see Table 2). While only one-quarter of the respondents currently belonged to traditional organizations (e.g., Catholic, Protestant, Baptist), almost one-half (45%) belonged to peripherial or non-mainstream religious organizations (e.g.,

Pentecostal, Evangelical, Non-denominational). Finally, it is important to note that there was a high degree of religious mobility among these parents. The majority of these parents were raised in traditional religions, but have since left and joined the more peripheral religious organizations.

[Insert Table 2 Here]

It is important to note that by no means do these data suggest that all home school parents are oriented to home schooling due to their religious beliefs. However, there is a large segment of the home school population who do teach their children at home for religious reasons and religious orientations and beliefs are an extremely important factor in the lives of this group. Religious conviction appeared to be the source of these families' home school decision. Home schooling allowed some of them to "teach religious truth by having them at home" and to "develop character qualities with a Biblical base. Others felt they were "inspired by the Lord to home school" and stated that "parents [are] listed in scripture as primarily responsible for education." Clearly, home schooling is deeply rooted in their religious world view. The religious home school family perceives public education as corrupted by secular influences and they are motivated to insure that their religious beliefs are realized in the education of their children. As one mother commented, "If you do not educate primarily with religious and moral values, then you have an educated devil."

Political Characteristics

Although the religious orientation of home school parents has received some attention by previous researchers, most studies have

failed to examine the political characteristics of this group. Mayberry (1991b) has suggested that home school parents engage in political action by circumventing institutional forms of education and that it is imperative that our understanding of this group take into account the political context of their decision. Thus, indicators of the political orientation and viewpoints of this group have been incorporated into this study.

We demonstrated that a large percentage of home school parents are religiously-oriented and that many now belong to peripheral and New Christian religions. This led us to predict that the political affiliation and viewpoint of this group would be conservative in nature. The data supported this prediction [see Table 3]. For instance, 30% of the respondents identified themselves as "strong Republican," 17% as "not very strong Republican," and 26% as "Independent close to Republican." Only 7% of the respondents indicated they had affinity with the Democratic party. Moreover, when asked about their "political viewpoint," 68% labeled themselves as "conservative" or "extremely conservative," while only 5% placed themselves in the liberal camp.

The conservative nature of this group is further illustrated in the types of political activities they have been involved in over the last two years (see Table 3). While over three-quarters of these parents voted in the last election (a percentage much high than seen in the national population), many were also involved in other types of political actions. For instance, 27% had attended a political caucus or convention, nearly one-quarter donated money to

a specific candidate, and 18% had donated money to a Political Action Committee.

The respondents' written comments gave us more information about the nature of these activities. For instance, much of their political involvement focused on letter-writing, circulating petitions, distributing literature, and door-to-door campaigning. Given the conservative orientation of this group, it is likely that these activities supported conservative candidates and causes. When the specific political orientations of these activities were addressed, they reflected conservative positions such as anti-abortion demonstrations and financial support to conservative causes.

[Insert Table 3 Here]

The conservative orientation of this group was also demonstrated by their lack of confidence in public education, organized labor, and the press--institutions commonly thought of as controlled by liberal elements in society (see Table 4). In each instance, a solid majority of home school parents expressed "hardly any" confidence in these institutions and only a very small percentage felt "a great deal" of confidence. It is interesting to note, however, that institutions commonly thought of as having a conservative orientation were also suspect among this group. The U.S. Supreme court, executive branch of the government, organized religion, major companies, and banks and financial institutions, were among those institutions that the majority of these home school parents expressed "only some" confidence about. In each case, only a small percentage of the parents maintained a "great deal" of

confidence in these institutions. Given the political conservatism of home school parents, greater, rather than less, confidence than what was demonstrated was expected. It appears that social institutions, regardless of their political orientation, have little support within the home school group.

[Insert Table 4]

Finally, the attitude of home school parents toward government spending for social problems was addressed (see Table 5). The majority of parents felt that "too much" money was being spent on both foreign aid and welfare. However, social problems that had a more direct community impact received more support. For instance, 48% of these parents felt "too little" money was being spent on "halting the rising crime rate, while a large majority of parents felt government spending in the areas of environmental protection, national health, solving problems in big cities, and dealing with drug addiction, was either "too little" or "about right."

[Insert Table 5]

It is not clear from these findings whether or not the "conservative" political label home school parents applied to themselves actually translates into conservative political stances when levels of government spending are at issue. These parents did not support a reduction in social spending in areas that are typically under attack by conservative politicians.

As we have seen, home school parents had little confidence in a wide spectrum of social institutions (both liberal and conservative) but did not have a unified position when it comes to government spending on social problems. It may be that while home school

parents "reject" the institutionalized structure of many organizations, they are better able to accept spending for specific programs that they feel have an immediate impact on their daily lives. This would be congruent with the suggestion made by Mayberry (1988, 1991b) that the decision to home school is "life-style politics" and related to the "rationalization" of social institutions--a process that is perceived by some social groups to be oppositional to the cultural and value orientations that construct 'their way of life.'

DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This paper has illuminated the religious and political characteristics and orientations of home school parents. In doing so, a number of issues have been raised. First, the religious orientation of many home school parents suggests that the secular framework of public school systems is under attack. These parents' religious convictions "fit" with the concept of home schooling. Home school appears to be a vehicle for parents to protect certain religious beliefs and 'ways of life' by allowing them to regain control over the primary arena of socialization--the education of children. A unique feature about the religious nature of these parents is their affinity to peripheral, non-mainstream religious organizations. Mainstream, institutionalized institutions have been rejected by a large proportion of these parents.

The significance of the relationship of these parents to peripheral religious organizations becomes somewhat clearer when we examine their political orientation. As we have discussed, the home school parents in this study, while labeling themselves as

politically conservative, tend to have little, if any, confidence in mainstream social institutions, even those that are traditionally thought of as conservative. It appears that home school parents maintain a marginalized position to the larger dominant society--not just in their decision to circumvent public schools, but in other areas of their lives as well. It is likely that the peripheral relationship these parents have to mainstream society is an important element existing before the decision to teach their children at home was made. That is, it may well be that for many home school parents the decision to circumvent public schools was a decision that was congruent with other aspects of their lives.

By examining the sociological research that has focused on the oppositional tendencies and countermovements that accompany modernization and secularization (see Hammond, 1985), the relationship between a family's educational decisions and wider social trends gains clearer focus. These studies suggest that as society becomes increasingly rationalized and technologized, there has been a collapse of consensus about the basic functions of social institutions and the values that guide them. New social movements emerge in response to the vanishing consensus, as people attempt to reinforce, protect, or revitalize alternative sets of beliefs and values--that is, systems of meaning through which a stable world view can be sustained.

Heinz (1983) builds upon these ideas and suggests that the family is the key symbol through which meaning systems are constructed, maintained, and reproduced. The disorientation of people in modern society, he contends, is often shaped into

challenges against modern culture and emerges as a contest over who is to control the family--the fundamental symbolic sphere of modern culture. The activity of home schooling may well represent a symbolic response to an icreasingly differentiated, rationalized, and secularized social system.

Thinking this way about the decision an increasing number of families are making to teach their children at home, sheds new light on policy considerations. Much recent policy has been oriented toward increasingly standardizing and rationalizing educational programs and environments so that disruptions and conflicts in the public education arena can be reduced. If we understand home schooling as well as other forms of privatized schooling as educational alternatives for a segment of the population that does not embrace mainstream (e.g., bureaucratized and rationalized) social institutions, we may find that attempts at standardization and rationalization only exacerbate the problem.

Educational policymakers need to understand the importance home school parents attach to family value systems and 'ways of life' in conjunction with acknowledging their resistance toward institutions that organize themselves in an increasingly rationalized manner that marginalizes their participation. Only with such understanding can viable policy that best serves the interests of parents, children, and the state be forumulated.

Policymakers are beginning to sense the importance of these issues as they move toward school-based management and parent-partnership programs. We encourage parents and educational administrators to continue in their attempts to find common ground.

Partnerships between communities and school districts, home and schools, and teachers, parents, and learners could potentially be the most beneficial arranagement for constructing cooperative relationships that bridge the gap between public educational institutions and private interests. In an increasingly rationalized social order where the voice of family interests tend to be obscured, educational programs aimed at incorporating the familial and cultural values of their communities may well address the needs of a growing segment of the population that feel marginalized by the contemporary organization of public education.

TABLE 1

IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS, UPBRINGING AND CURRICULUM IN DECISION TO HOME SCHOOL

Importance of Religious Beliefs in Decision	Percentage
Very Important	67
Somewhat Important	20
Not Too Important	5
Not Important at All	7
	(N=575)
Importance of Religious Upbringing in Current Parenting Beliefs	
Rank of Importance	
1	29
2	12
3	1
4	1
Unranked	57
	(N=246)
Lack of Religious Curriculum As Reason for Not Enrolling Child in Public School	
Rank of Importance	
1	13
2	8
3	5
4	3
5-9	4
Unranked	33
	(N=188)

TABLE 2

CHURCH ATTENDENCE, RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT, ORTHODOXY, AND ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATION

Church Attendence	Percentage
Several Times a Week	34
Every Week	40
Nearly Every Week	8
Two or Three Times a Month	3
Once a Month	2
Several Times a Year	3
About Once or Twice a Year	3
Less than Once a Year	5
	(N=571)
Importance of Religious Commitment	
Very Important	89
Somewhat Important	6
Not Very Important	2
Not Important at All	2
	(N=562)
Agree with Scale of Religious Orthodoxy	
Strongly Agree	85
Agree	6
Uncertain	2
Disagree	3
Strongly Disagree	5
	(N=544)
Current Religious Affiliation	
MAINSTREAM ORGANIZATIONS	
Catholic	3
Methodist	2
Espiscopalian	1
Baptist	11
Lutheran	1
LDS	6
7th Day Adventist	1
Presbyterian	2
NON-MAINSTREAM ORGANIZATIONS	
Pentecostal	14
Christian Science	--
Evangelical	19
Jehovah's Witness	1
Nazarene	3
Non-denominational	28
None	8
	(N=1140)

TABLE 3

POLITICAL AFFILIATION AND VIEWPOINT

Political Affiliation	Percentage
Strong Democrat	1
Not Very Strong Democrat	2
Independent, close to Democrat	3
Independent	11
Independent, close to Republican	26
Not Very Strong Republican	17
Strong Republican	30
Libertarian	5
Other Party	2
	(N=567)
Political Viewpoint	
Extremely Liberal	1
Liberal	2
Slightly Liberal	2
Moderate, Middle of the Road	7
Slightly Conservative	9
Conservative	55
Extremely Conservative	14
	(N=578)
Political Activities	
Voted in Las Election	75
Attended Caucus/Convention	27
Donated Money to Candidate	23
Yard Sign	22
Donated Money to PAC	18
Bumper Sticker	12
Campaign Button	11
Donated Money to Home School PAC	4

TABLE 4

DEGREE OF CONFIDENCE IN SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS
(in percentages)

Social Institution	A Great Deal	Only Some	Hardly Any	No Response
Banks & Financial	6	60	29	5
Major Companies	7	59	29	5
Organized Religion	14	57	23	6
Public Education	1	31	65	3
Executive Branch	22	59	15	4
Organized Labor	2	33	62	4
The Press	1	19	77	3
U.S. Supreme Court	8	63	24	4

TABLE 5

GOVERNMENT SPENDING FOR SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Social Problem	Amount of Government Spending			
	to little	about right	too much	no response
Protecting Environment	33	35	18	15
Improving Nation's Health	35	35	14	16
Solving Big Cities' Problems	24	34	19	23
Halting Rising Crime Rate	48	23	11	18
Dealing With Drug Addiction	33	31	17	19
Improving Education System	32	15	38	16
Improving Condition of Minorities	14	37	29	20
The Military and Defense	15	40	30	15
Foreign Aid	2	24	57	17
Welfare	7	19	59	16

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